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Nudes & Company

A model walks out from a changing closet. The room is dim and dusty. Several large and dish-shaped lights project harsh shadows upon the walls. A small gathering of people litter the room, seated at wooden drawing horses. They rustle through large pads of newsprint. The horses are centered around a small carpeted platform in the middle of the room. Slowly, the model steps up onto the platform. A stopwatch beeps. Charcoal begins to squeak across paper.

In fine art, there are many universal visual genres. Landscapes, historics, portraits, still lifes, and scenes of everyday life are other genres. The nude, while fluctuating in popularity, is a token genres of western fine art. The human body functions as a symbol, a critique, and a scene for creating art art. Pieces containing nudity have, in the past, been controversial and shocking. Up until about the 1300s, they weren't respected or allowed in the western art world. Skip ahead to the 1600s in Europe, and art critics and spectators would expect to see realistic sculptures, paintings and other pieces of media containing nude bodies. It's practically a staple.

Artist: When I start with a figure drawing, I begin with gestures. I do not cite the body. I do not measure. My eyes move continuously from my newsprint to the body, as if this were a game of ping pong. 10 seconds, and the stopwatch beeps. The model shifts in one fluid movement to the next pose. I move to a blank section of the paper and begin again.

Why do artists create work about the human body? In the middle ages, nudity was looked down upon due to modesty. The best-selling Book of Genesis was also very popular during this time, and it associated nudity with shame. However, the nude body came back into social and artistic acceptability during the Renaissance. Most westerners during the Renaissance believed that the sun revolved around the earth. Humanity was seen as a final product. Nudity, during this

time, was a statement of godlike power. This is especially apparent in marble sculptures of greek and roman gods.

However, nudity has also a functioned as mark of disempowerment. In the 19th century, CMNF (clothed male nude female) was a huge theme in western art (and porn). In *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe* by Édouard Manet there are two clothed men and two nude women sitting in a forest near a river. The women's nudity in this painting is does not signify power, especially when displayed next to two clothed men. It is a sign of submission. *The Pastoral Concert* by Titan, *Slave market in Rome* by Jean-Léon Gérôme, and *Knight Errant* by John Everett Millais were also painted during this century. In these paintings, nudity functions as a sign of humiliation and victimhood. Nudity can also function to relate to class placement. It is often high brow fine art to portray poverty.

Model: Many people think that it's uncomfortable to pose nude. It can be. (Sometimes rooms are cold. Sometimes, there's an student who can't stop giggling.) It's not sexy either. It's very hard work. It takes a lot of concentration to hold still. Marina Abramovic, a revolutionary performer said "The hardest thing is to do something which is close to nothing because it is demanding all of you". *This is true for posing. I go through my most draining poses, the ones with arms held high, first. For me, the hardest thing about holding a pose is my breathing. My chest cannot move dramatically, between inhale and exhales. While posing I tend to breathe very shallowly.*

In the western art world, the artist and the models are treated differently upon the creation of a piece. The artist is celebrated for the nudity. The model carries a long lived stigma. Nude modeling itself was looked on to be a job similar to prostitution in the 1600s. It was thought to be a job that people did when they had nothing else to do. Modeling also wasn't open to just

‘anyone’ at an institutional level. Up until the 19th century, the only art students and art models were male.

Artist: The gestures are finished. Now I am beginning to draw some longer poses. They take between 5-15 minutes. Now that I have time, I begin to cite and measure. When I draw a body, I always start with the head. I have tried many times to draw the body first, and then add the head. It never works. The head appears to have been pasted on. There is some odd realm of importance to what you draw first. This comes out heavy in figure drawing. We spend so much time looking at other people, it’s so easy to spot the mistakes.

If a portrait becomes famous and enters into a museum, there will be an artist tag. On the tag, the artist will have their name displayed next to the piece. The model will not. They will remain anonymous. The portrait could not exist without either of their work, so the piece is a collaboration. Why do we not credit nude models? Because we undervalue bodily labor.

Modeling is a lot like working out. There’s something about performing internal movements that is notoriously hard to put into words. This is even truer for a lack of such. Kathy Acker talks about an “antagonism between bodybuilding and verbal language” (22). This kind of work is intense and internal.

The drawing of the body itself is inevitably political. Leonardo da Vinci’s *Manuscript* was one of the first anatomy-based exhibitions. It was a blend of medicinal, scientific and artistic visions on the body. In 2010, the Vancouver Art Gallery displayed an exhibition called *Visceral Bodies*. It was presented alongside Leonardo da Vinci’s *Mechanics of a Man*. The pieces were meant to challenge and respond to the ongoing medicalization of the body, and to complicate the medical body. *Visceral Bodies* also explored histories of violence, politics, emotion and the inner ‘gut’. In these works, artists argue against the separation of these characteristic from what the

term ‘body’ is evolving into. Art is also a way to deconstruct the ‘universal body’ of the european white male.

All depiction of bodies has bias. Bias stretches past skin and goes down to bone. It is hard to pinpoint when exactly the first accurate human skeleton was drawn, but Leonardo da Vinci is commonly acknowledged as creating some of the first and best illustrations in 1489. However, the astonishing accuracy of these drawings didn’t extend to female bodies. This was because da Vinci had trouble obtaining female corpses to dissect. Instead da Vinci dissected female animals, mostly cows, and called it good.

It wasn’t until 1759 that Marie Geneviève Charlotte Thiroux d'Arconville created the first ‘academic’ illustration of the female skeleton. Or so she claimed. In the illustration, d'Arconville drew a smaller skull and a larger pelvis. This was a decision on her part, to explain that women were more stupid and natural than their male counterparts. The first truly accurate depiction of the female skeleton wasn’t created until 1796, by a german astronomist named Samuel Thomas von Sömmerring. That is 307 years later than the male skeleton.

The visual art world, for all of it’s ‘progression’, carries strict guidelines on what bodies can or cannot be considered neutral. Those guidelines restrict even further when the artist is trying to sell a creation involving bodies. Figure drawing is a way to celebrate and document bodies and its gestures. Figure drawing has also evolved to become something of a market, in which drawings are sold to wealthy individuals and marketing teams. The bodies involved in the market are overwhelmingly white, thin, and cisgender. These bodies are also considered to be ‘proportional’. The standard taught in most fine art classes is figure that is 6 heads tall figure. However, this is considered to be too ‘dumpy’ for industry and fine art. Most advertising agencies will turn away most anything under ‘idealistic’ body type, 8 heads high with a claim

that they are not going for anything ‘political’. After ‘idealistic’ standards, there comes ‘fashion’ standards at 8.5 heads tall. Finally there is ‘heroic’ standards, at 9 heads high. Most renaissance painters and sculptures used ‘heroic’ standards.

A figure drawing industry classic, “Figure Drawing for all its Worth” by Andrew Loomis commands that professional illustrators working for hire not to blur gender lines or fight against the traditional white body type if they want to sell their work. This well-respected book lists out that “the hair and breasts, of course, distinguish the female figure, but they are merely its most obvious characteristics. The female is different from head to toe.” (57). And also, “Nothing will kill a sale faster than fatness or shortness.” (58). If we look at bodies this way as artists and as marketers, we are actively reinforcing the status quo. These drawings are not representations or illustrations of bodies, they are powerful political gatekeepers. If we sell the representation of the body, then representation itself is becoming a commodity that many people cannot afford. Restricting bodily representation is wrong, first for artistic abilities and then more importantly, for public empathies.

Bodies are inherently political, no matter how they are meant to be portrayed. Even the “outdated notion of a ‘universal’ body” (Augaitis, 8) in the western world has bodily effects of reinforcing white supremacy. Studies, small sketches done in preparation for larger piece, are not meant to be controversial yet Vincent Van Gogh’s *Peasant Character Studies* were controversial during his time. The wealthy individuals who could afford to buy art didn’t consider these poor bodies to be worthy of study or documentation. Bodies are intimate scenes of violence, capital and profit. This is true for all bodies, not just those othered by the west, such as queer bodies and bodies of color.

Bodies are scenes of violence and hatred. They can also be scenes of acceptance, of celebration, and of peace. To do this, we need to unlearn a standard body, and exercise and unlearn these signs of overwhelming standards and cop out ways of seeing one another.

Sources

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